



GAMES & SPORTS IN ANCIENT INDIA

Ashim Roy

Guest Lecturer, Dept. of Sanskrit, Mathabhang College, Westbengal.

ABSTRACT

Since ancient time, the relationship between the Guru (teacher) and the student (hisyo) has always been considered as an integral part of Indian sport. Indian games & sports reached a peak of excellence when Buddhism held sway here. In Villas Mani Majra, Tiruvadacharya describes many fascinating games, namely, Chess, Cards, Snakes & Ladders, Mancala, Archery, Equitation, Hammer-throwing, Chariot-racing and many more. In Manas Olhas (1135 A.D.), Someshwar writes about bhrashram (weight-lifting), bhrmanshram (walking) and also about Mall-Stambha (wrestling). It is noticeable that many of today's Olympic disciplines are sophisticated versions of the games of strength and speed that flourished in ancient India and Greece. Chess, wrestling, polo, archery and hockey (possibly a fall-out from polo) are some of the games believed to have originated in India. This paper attempts to provide some insights into some of these games & sports that were popular in Ancient India.

KEYWORDS: Sports, Games, Ancient India.

INTRODUCTION

The history of sports in India dates back to the Vedic era. There were well-defined values like the mantra in the Atharva-Veda, saying, "Duty is in my right hand and the fruits of victory in my left". In terms of an ideal, these words hold the same sentiments as the traditional Olympic oath: ".....For the Honour of my Country and the Glory of Sport." The founders of the Olympic idea had India very much in mind when they were deciding on the various disciplines. There is an amazing link between Greece and India which stretches back to 975 B.C. The zest for chariot-racing and wrestling is and was common to both the countries. Many of the present day Olympic disciplines are sophisticated versions of the games involving strength and speed that were common in ancient India and Greece.

Most traditional games & sports of India were transmitted to foreign countries, where they were developed further. Some such games include Chess, Snakes and Ladders, Playing Cards, Polo, the martial arts of Judo and Karate. Particularly, the games of chess, ludo (including ladders and snake), and playing cards, now familiar across the world owe their origins in India.

Games in Ancient India

Chess

The famous epic Mahabharata narrates an incident where a game, *Chaturang* was played between two groups of the warring cousins. The age when epic *Mahabharata* was written is variously dated around 800 BC to 1000 BC. In some form or the other, the game continued till it evolved into chess.

Chess originated in ancient India and was known as *Chatur-Anga* - Meaning 4 bodied, as it was played by 4 players. From this name we have its current name *Shatranj*. The word *Checkmate* has its root in the Persian term *Shah Mat* which means 'the king is dead!'. The Sanskrit translation of this would be *Kshatra Mruta*. Another term, 'the rook' which is the name for one set of the counters used in chess, originated from the Persian term *Roth* which means a soldier. The Persian terms according to sources are derived from the Indian term *Rukh*, which obviously seems to have originated in the Sanskrit word *Rakshak* which means a soldier from *Raksha* which means 'to protect'.

The Indian origin of the game of chess is supported even by the Encyclopedia Britannica according to which, About 1783-89 Sir. William Jones, in an essay published in the 2nd Vol. of Asiatic Researches, argued that Hindustan was the cradle of chess, the game having been known there from time immemorial by the name *Chaturanga*, that is, the four angas, or members of an army, which are said in the *Amarakosha* (an ancient Indian Dictionary - S.B.) to be elephants, horses, chariots and foot soldiers.

Another version says that the game of chess was originally called *Ashtapada* (sixty-four squares). "*Ashtapada*" in Sanskrit denotes a spider - "*a legendary being with eight legs*" and this game was played with a dice on an 8x8 checkered board. 1000 years back, the squares weren't black and white like we see in the presently used chess board. Other Indian boards included the 10x10 *Dasapada* and the 9x9 *Saturankam*. Later this game came to be known as *Chaturanga*. The Sanskrit name *Chaturanga* means „quadripartite“ — the four *Angas* (divided into four parts) which symbolize "the 4 branches of the army." Like real Indian armies at that time, the pieces were called elephants, chariots, horses and foot soldiers. Unlike modern chess, *Chaturanga* was mainly a game of chance where

results depended on how well you rolled the dice. Played on an authentic cloth by 2, 3 or 4 players, *Chaturanga* combines the basic strategy of chess with the dynamic challenge of chance as each move is determined by the random roll of a wooden dice. In fact, in the *Mahabharata*, *Yudhishthira* and *Duryodhana* played a version of *Chaturanga* using a dice. The game *Chaturanga* was a battle simulation game which rendered Indian military strategy of the time.

Cards

The popular game of cards originated in ancient India and was known as *Krida-Patram*. These cards were made of cloth and depicted motifs from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* along with ancient artwork. The tradition is still carried on today with floral motifs and natural scenery. This game was patronized especially by the royal and noble class. In medieval India, playing cards were known as „*Ganjifa*“ cards and were played in practically all royal courts. It is recorded to have been played in Rajputana, Kashyapa Meru (Kashmir), Utkala (Orissa), the Deccan and even in Nepal. The Mughals also patronized this game, but the Mughal card-sets differed from those of the ancient Indian royal courts. According to Abul Fazal's (Author of the *Ain-e-Akbari*) description of the game, the following cards were used. The first was *Ashvapati* which is the „lord of horses“. The *Ashvapati* which was ranked the highest card in the pack, represented the picture of the king on a horseback. The second represented a General (*Senapati*) on a horseback. After this card came ten other cards with pictures of horses from one to ten. Another set of cards had the *Gajapati* (lord of elephants) which represented the king whose power lay in the number of elephants. The other eleven cards in this pack represented the *Senapati* and ten others with a soldier astride an elephant. Another pack had the *Narpati*, a king whose power lies in his infantry. The other cards were known as the *Dhanapati*, the lord of treasures, *Dalpati* the lord of the squadron, *Navapati*, the lord of the navy, *Surapati*, the lord of divinities, *Asrapati*, the lord of genii, *Vanapati*, the king of the forest, *Ahipati*, the lord of snakes and so on. Based on reports by Abul Fazal, we can say that the game of playing cards was invented by sages in ancient times who took the number 12 as the basis and made a set of 12 cards. Every king had 11 followers, thus a pack had 144 cards. The Mughals retained 12 sets, and so they had 96 cards. The Mughal *Ganjifa* sets have representations of diverse trades like Nakkash painter, Mujallid book binder, Rangrez dyer, etc. In addition to this, there were also the *Padishah-i-Qimash*, the king of the manufacturers and *Padishah-izar-i-Safid*, the king of silver, and many more. The pre-Mughal origin of the game of cards is evident if we examine the pattern of painting on the cards. We also find that despite the observation of Abul Fazal that Akbar introduced the pack with 8 sets, we find that even earlier, in Indian (Hindu) courts we have packs with 8, 9 and 10 sets apart from the usual 12. The numbers were derived from the eight cardinal directions *Ashtadikpala*, for the pack with 8 set; from the nine planets *Navagraha* for the one with 9 sets and from ten incarnations *Dashavatara* of Vishnu for the pack with 10 sets. The largest number of such cards are to be found in Orissa. The painters from Orissa have represented various illustrations like the *Navagunjara*, a mythical bird-human animal which was the form assumed by Sri Krishna to test Arjuna's fidelity. Illustrations from the *Dashavatara* of Vishnu are also portrayed. All these cards were hand-made and were painted traditionally. This required considerable patience and hard meticulous work. The kings usually commissioned painters to make cards as per their preference. The commoners got their cards made by local artists who were found in urban and rural areas. In order to obtain the required thickness, a number of sheets of pieces of cloth were glued together. The outlines of the rim were painted in black and then the figures were filled with colors. As cards were played by members of all strata of the society, we find a vari-

ety of cards. Cards were made of ivory, tortoise shell, mother of pearls, inlaid or enameled with precious metals. The circular cards were more common but there were different shapes like oval & rectangular as well. The cards were usually kept in a wooden box with a lid painted with mythological figures. This art of handmade, hand painted cards which survived for hundreds of years, decayed gradually and thus became extinct with the introduction of printed paper cards by the Europeans in the 17-18th centuries. With the extinction of the art of making and painting cards, the memory that Indians played the game of cards with their own specific representations of the Narapati, Gajapati and Ashvapati was forgotten too.

Snakes & Ladders

The game had its origin in India and was called *Moksha Patam* or *Parama Padam* or *Mokshapat*. It was used to teach Hindu Dharma and Hindu values to children. The British renamed it as Snakes and Ladders. The game was created by the 13th century poet saint *Gyandev*. The ladders in the game represented virtues and the snakes indicated vices. The game was played with cowrie shells and dices. Later through time, the game underwent several modifications but the meaning is the same i.e good deeds take us to heaven and evil to a cycle of re-births. There are certain references which take the game back to 2nd century BC.

In the original game square 12 was faith, 51 was Reliability, 57 was Generosity, 76 was Knowledge, and 78 was Asceticism. These were the squares were the ladder was found. Square 41 was for Disobedience, 44 for Arrogance, 49 for Vulgarity, 52 for Theft, 58 for Lying, 62 for Drunkenness, 69 for Debt, 84 for Anger, 92 for Greed, 95 for Pride, 73 for Murder and 99 for Lust. These were the squares where the snake was found. The Square 100 represented Nirvana or *Moksha*.

Also known as „*paramapadam*‘, there are a hundred squares on a board; the ladders take you up, the snakes bring you down. The difference here is that the squares are illustrated. The top of the ladder depicts a God, or one of the various heavens (*kailasa*, *vaikuntha*, *brahmaloka*) and so on, while the bottom describes a good quality. Conversely, each snake’s head is a negative quality or an *asura* (demon). As the game progresses, the various karma and *samskara*, good deeds and bad, take you up and down the board. Interspersed are plants, people and animals.

The game serves a dual purpose: entertainment, as well as dos and don’ts, divine reward and punishment, ethical values and morality. The final goal leads to *Vaikuntha* or heaven, depicted by Vishnu surrounded by his devotees, or *Kailasa* with Shiva, *Parvati*, *Ganesha* and *Skanda*, and their devotees. In this age of moral and ethical degeneration, this would be a good way of teaching values to children who think they already know more than their parents.

If *paramapadam* teaches moral values, *pallankuli* develops skill and quick thinking. Two players compete on a board consisting of between seven and twenty pits per player; each player has to collect the coins or shells or seeds with which the game is played, the player with the maximum number being the winner. There are nine variations of this game, each a „*pandi*“, with regional, caste and religious variations. It was very popular among women and required a good memory and alertness, as they had to count and remember the number of coins or seeds accumulated by the opponent. The British took the game to England in 1892 and named it Snakes and Ladders and changed it according to Victorian values.

Dice

The dice is attributed to India by some accounts. Some of the earliest archaeological evidence of oblong dice have been found in Harappan sites such as Kalibangan, Lothal, Ropar, Alamgirpur, Desalpur and surrounding territories, some dating back to the third millennium BCE, which were used for gambling. The oblong or cubical dice (*aksha*) is the precursor of the more primitive *vibhishaka*—small, hard nuts drawn randomly to obtain factors of a certain integer. Dicing is believed to have later spread westwards to Persia, influencing Persian board games. Early references to dicing can be found in the *Rig Veda* as well as the newer *atharvaveda*.

Mancala

If *Paramapadam* teaches us moral values, *Mancala* (*Pallankuli*) develops mental skill and quick thinking. Two players compete on a board consisting between seven to twenty pits per player, where each player has to collect the coins or shells or seeds with which the game is played. The player with the maximum number is declared the winner. There are nine variations of this game, each with regional, caste and religious significance. This game was extremely popular among women and required a good memory and an alert mind since they had to count and remember the number of coins or seeds accumulated by the opponent. This is a traditional *mancala* game played in South India (especially Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala), Sri Lanka and Malaysia. This game is also known as *Ali guli mane* (in Kannada), *Vamana guntalu* (in Telugu), *Pallanghuzi* (in Tamil) and *Kuzhipara* (in Malayalam).

Martial Arts

Martial arts by the name of *Kalaripayattu* are a native of Kerala. Ancient India claims to have been the origin of Judo and Karate. Similar to karate was *Kalaripayate*. The weapons of war like the javelin (*toran*) and the discus (*chakra*),

ra), were also, frequently used in the sports arena. Lord Krishna wielded an impressive discus or *Sudarshan* chakra. Arjuna and Bhima, excelled in archery and weightlifting respectively. Bhimsen, Hanuman, Jamvant, Jarasandha were some of the great champion wrestlers of yore.

Women also excelled in the art of self - defence, and were active participants in games like cock fighting, quail fighting, and ram fighting. Gautam Buddha himself was an ace at archery, chariot - racing, equitation and hammer - throwing.

The renowned Chinese travelers Hieun Tsang and Fa Hien wrote of the plethora of sporting activities in ancient India. Swimming, sword - fighting (fencing, as we know it today), running, wrestling and ball games were immensely popular among the students of Nalanda and Taxila. The Agra fort and the Red Fort were the popular venues of many a wrestling bout, in the times of Emperor Shahjahan.

ASOLAAP(Canoe Race)

Canoeing is a very familiar activity with the Nicobarese tribals as this was their only means of transport for their journeys from one island to another. In Asol Aap, the canoe's length is approximately 100' and the number of participants in each team is decided according to the size of the canoe. As the race takes place on the sea , and depth of water and current vary from shore side to deep sea, only two teams participate at a time. The number of participants is generally 40 to 90, as per the size of the canoe.

ASOL TALE-AAP(Canoe Race on sand)

In this peculiar canoe race, the craft is built from the stem of a coconut tree, and can be of any size for its one or two participants. But in a race, the number of participants must be the same for each canoe. 15 to 20 participants take part at a time. The land of Nicobar being sandy and even, favours this game. All the participants sit in their canoes keeping one leg in the canoe, and the other on the sandy ground. They drive their canoe on the sand with the force of their limbs. The one who completes the distance in the shortest span of time is the winner. This activity involves great strength of body, especially in the hands

Kho-Kho

Kho-Kho ranks as one of the most popular traditional sports in India. The origin of Kho-Kho is difficult to trace, but many historians believe, that it is a modified form of 'Run Chase', which in its simplest form involves chasing and touching a person. With its origins in Maharashtra, Kho-Kho in ancient times, was played on 'raths'(chariots), and was known as *Rathara*.

It demands a great deal of physical fitness, strength, speed and stamina, and a certain amount of ability. Dodging, feinting and bursts of controlled speed make this game quite thrilling. The game develops qualities such as obedience, discipline, sportsmanship, and loyalty between team members.

INSUKNAWR(Rod - pushing)

Insuknawr or rod - pushing is an indigenous game of the state of Mizoram, played only by men. It is a very ancient sport and is still continued to be played in the state of Mizoram. *Insuknawr* has been declared a 'Mizo National Game ' by the Mizoram State Sports Council. It is a test of sheer strength and stamina. The game is played within a circle with a diameter of 16 to 18 ft, and the only instrument used is a rounded wooden rod or pole, 8 ft long and 3 to 4 inches in diameter. The aim of the game is to push the opponent out of the circle within three to five attempts or rounds.

Mallakhamb

Mallakhamb is an ancient traditional Indian sport. 'Malla' means gymnast, and 'khamb' means pole. Thus, the name 'Mallakhamb' stands for 'a gymnast's pole'. The origin of *Mallakhamb* can be traced to the 12th century, where it is mentioned in *Manas-Olhas* - a classic by Chalukya in 1135 A.D

Silambam

The state of Tamil Nadu is considered to be the cradle of modern and scientific staff fencing, popularly known in Tamil as *Silambam*. The Pandya kings ruling in Tamil Nadu promoted *Silambam* fencing, and so did their Chola and Chera counterparts. *Silapathiharam* Tamil literature, dating back to 2nd century A.D., refers to the sale of *silambam* staves, swords, pearls and armour to foreign traders. The ancient trading centre at Madurai city, renowned globally, was said to be thronged by Romans, Greeks, Egyptians among others who had regular sea trade with the ancient Dravidian kings. The *silambam* staff was one of the martial art weapons, that was in great demand with the foreign visitors.

Polo

India is said to have set the base for modern Polo. In the 15th century, Babur made the sport popular when he founded the Mughal Empire. Later, the Britishers globalized the sport which was only played in the areas of Manipur, Jammu & Kashmir and other states. Another variation of polo is the one played with Elephants and is known as „Elephant Polo“. It is played in India (Rajasthan), Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, England and Scotland. Since very ancient times, Elephants have been a part of Indian culture. They were representatives of the strength and power of Kings and Emperors. It was therefore natural that polo “The King of Sports” and simultaneously “The Sport of the Kings” was included to be played on elephants as well.

Kalari Payattu

Kalari is the Malayalam word, for a special kind of gymnasium, where the martial art known as *Kalari Payattu*, is practiced. It had its origins in the 4th century A. D. Legends claim, that the art began with the sage *Parasurama*, who possessed mystical powers. He built temples and also introduced other martial arts that have influenced and shaped many other arts. The art reached its zenith in the 16th century.

CONCLUSION

Ancient India had a rich tradition of games that were played and passed on through generations and cultures for not only leisure but also to develop mental capabilities and maintain physical fitness. During ancient times, physical fitness was given prime importance, especially by the kings and the higher-class warriors. Here we discussed some well-known indoor & outdoor games that took birth in the soils of Ancient India, many of which are still actively played throughout the world.

REFERENCES

1. Sharma Sushant, <https://www.sportskeeda.com/cricket/sports-fanaticism-in-india-history-and-where-are-we-today>
2. "Department of Sports". YAS. Retrieved 1 August 2010.
3. <http://veda.wikidot.com/info:origin-of-games>
4. <https://aphilomathsjournal.wordpress.com/2015/11/30/popular-games-sports-that-originated-in-ancient-india/>
5. "Indian Olympic Association". Olympic.ind.in. Retrieved 1 August 2010.
6. <http://yas.nic.in/writereaddata/linkimages/6831719428.pdf>
7. <http://www.thebetterindia.com/10492/lesser-known-traditional-games-sports-india/>
8. <http://quatr.us/india/games/>
9. <http://www.traditionalgames.in/>
10. <http://dharanisr.blogspot.in/2010/02/sports-and-games-in-ancient-india.html>